Philosophy 308
The Language Revolution
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Class #24
Davidson's Programme

Compositionality and Meaning

- Compositional semantics is standardly thought to consist of two distinct parts.
  - ‣ CMT: A compositional meaning theory
  - ‣ CTT: A compositional truth theory
- We have looked at two related kinds of worries about CMTs.
  - ‣ 1. Worries about the ontology of propositions.
  - ‣ 2. Worries about particular theories.
- Davidson agrees that there are insuperable problems with CMTs.
- His program is to show that CTTs can serve all the legitimate ends we might have for CMTs.

Davidson on Fregean CMTs

- "explanatorily inert"
- "My objection to meanings in the theory of meaning is not that they are abstract or that their identity conditions are obscure, but that they have no demonstrated use" (92).
  - ‣ Belief sentences
  - ‣ Fregean CMTs are bogus
- But, Frege solves the three puzzles!
- We can take Davidson's argument against propositions to be purely Okhamist.

Truth Theories
as Meaning Theories

- Davidson's big idea is that a compositional truth theory (CTT) can do all the work we want of a compositional meaning theory (CMT).

- Determining truth is our first task in radical translation.

- If we know the conditions under which a statement is true, and we can show how these truth conditions can be built up through the language compositionally, then we have no need for a contentious CMT.

- If Davidson's program were to work, then we could have a semantic theory without reference to any meaning entities and thus deny ontological commitment to meanings or propositions.

- Extensionalism

Syntax as Semantics

- The naive extensionalist, giving up meanings, might try to construct a semantic theory out of the syntax of the language, relying, say, on Chomsky's work on generative grammar.

- But a recursive syntax, even plus a dictionary, doesn't give you recursive semantics because of the problems with intensional contexts.
  - ‣ Chinese room considerations?
  - ‣ 'Creature with a heart' and 'creature with a kidney'

- We need a fuller account of truth, one which is not merely syntactic.

Tarski

- Davidson takes Tarski's definition of truth as fundamental.
  - ‣ p is true if and only if x

- "[Tarski's] definition works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence - any sentence - to be true, and this amounts, in one good sense we can give to the phrase, to understanding the language" (95).

- Non-deflationary interpretation

Tarksi's Hierarchy
and Davidson's Project

- Tarski defines a truth predicate for each level in a hierarchy of increasingly complex languages.
    - ‣ What do they have in common?
    - ‣ He fails to define a predicate of the form 's is true in L' for variable L.
- From Tarski we thus get no general definition of the concept of truth.
    - ‣ Field: Tarski's theory lacks instructions for how to apply 'truth' to a word newly added to a language.
- There are two ways to think about the ramifications of the hierarchy in Tarski's theory.
    - ‣ T1: Tarski did not capture essential elements of our concept of truth.
    - ‣ T2: Tarski did define truth, and it turns out that truth isn't that interesting.
- Davidson denies both
    - ‣ "Frege's massive contribution was to show how 'all', 'some', 'every', 'each', 'none', and associated pronouns, in some of their uses, could be tamed; for the first time, it was possible to dream of a formal semantics for a significant part of a natural language. This dream came true in a sharp way with the work of Tarski. It would be a shame to miss the fact that as a result of these two magnificent achievements, Frege's and Tarski's, we have gained a deep insight into the structure of our mother tongues" (100).

Truth and Natural Languages

- Natural languages don't seem to have the Tarski hierarchy.
  - ‣ They resist formal interpretation.

- Also, natural languages have paradoxes and ambiguities.
  - ‣ E.g. vagueness

- Davidson
  - ‣ Semantic paradoxes are *reductios* on the idea that languages are universal.
  - ‣ Problems of vagueness are not problems of language, and so the theory of meaning should not be burdened with the responsibility of solving them.

- We can work up a truth predicate for a substantial portion of our language.

- Any formalized sub-version of English is closely related to it.

- The bigger the sub-language, as it approaches the natural language, the better it serves our purposes.

- We carry the ambiguities into the metalanguage and the theory of meaning (in the guise of a theory of truth) has done its work.

- Kripke

The Big Question

- Is understanding the truth conditions for sentences, even correspondence-truth conditions, sufficient for understanding a language?

The Big Answer

- No.

Some Theorems of Davidsonian Semantic Theories

- DT1: '7+5=12' is true iff 9-5=4

- DT2: 'Shanga Langa Lang' is true in Marinese iff Romeo loves Juliet

- DT3: 'pjppqwoiehf-8q348' is true in L_x iff pigs can fly

- These don't seem to capture meaning.

- Also: some meaningful sentences lack truth conditions.
  - ‣ Do the logic homework!
  - ‣ Did you get the solution to the last problem?

Substitution in Opaque Contexts and Identity

- Quine takes the problem of opaque contexts to be so intractable that he gives up on them, banishing them from any proper language.

- Davidson uses the failures of Fregean propositions to account for belief sentences as a reason to reject them.

- He had better give an account of them.

- Davidson claims that his theory of demonstratives will do the job.
  - "The fact that demonstratives are amenable to formal treatment ought greatly to improve hopes for a serious semantics of natural language, for it is likely that many outstanding puzzles, such as the analysis of quotations or sentences about propositional attitudes, can be solved if we recognize a concealed demonstrative construction (104).

- Maybe.

Truth Theory Presumes Meaning Theory

- For Davidson, the truth theory is supposed to serve in place of a meaning theory.

- I should be able to give you the truth conditions for all the sentences in a language, without reference to meaning at all.

- Once I do so, you will understand the language so well that you won't even want a meaning theory.

- But, among the sentences of the CTT will be sentences like:
  - ''Grass is green' means that grass is green'' is true iff 'grass is green' means that grass is green.
  - ''Snow is white' means that snow is white'' is true iff 'snow is white' means that snow is white.

- So the truth theory will include all the postulates of a meaning theory within it.

- Instead of replacing the meaning theory, Davidson's truth theory presumes it.

Two Strategies for Avoiding Intensions

Via Hartry Field

- S1. Reduction: reduce the semantic theory to another theory
- S2. Elimination: get rid of semantic terms
- Semanticists in the 1930's were opting for S2.
- Tarski wanted them to consider S1.
  - IBS tried to reduce semantic theory to physical theory, with an eye toward physicalism.
- Quine urged S2.

Toward a Physicalist Theory of Reference

- In order to get a physicalist theory of reference, we would need to explain, without reference to any semantic terms:
  - ‣ P1. Why 'snow is white' is true; and
  - ‣ P2. Why 'schnee ist weiss' is true, too; and
  - ‣ P3. The connection between the P1 and P2.

- Even if Davidson's project were to rid us of commitments to intensions, if we were left with un-reduced and un-eliminated terms of reference, the physicalist would not be satisfied.

- Getting rid of all semantic notions is more difficult than perhaps Davidson thought.

- Perhaps we should think about embracing a non-Fregean semantic theory.
  - ‣ Jerry Katz in *Metaphysics of Meaning* or *Sense, Reference, and Philosophy*.